

Euripides and the lionesses

Matthew Hiscock

In the *Medea*, Euripides repeatedly compares his protagonist with a lioness. You might think that this is an obvious image for a violent, but also fiercely protective, maternal figure. But if you do, then you are wrong. Matthew Hiscock shows how important it is to look at the ancient evidence for how Greeks viewed the world before assuming that they viewed it as we do. Ancient Greek lionesses turn out to be more complex and surprising than you expect.

Early in the *Medea* the Nurse is anxious about approaching her mistress because she has been glaring at the servants ‘with the look of a lioness that has just given birth’. It is the first of four images of Medea as a lioness. The rest come after Medea has killed her children, when Jason twice abuses Medea by calling her a lioness – only for her to disarm him by accepting the label. For most modern readers the significance of this set of images will seem relatively straightforward. Throughout the play, Medea is compared with a series of animals and monsters, and it seems obvious that, like the other animal imagery, the image of the lioness stands for Medea’s inhumanity. Thus there is a potent irony in the Nurse’s simile: if it implies, as it seems to do, that lionesses are particularly protective of their new-born cubs, then Medea will, in killing her children, behave in a way unnatural even for a lioness.

But this ‘obvious’ conclusion about the significance of the image of the lioness is not something we can take for granted. Indeed, even as it stands, this explanation requires us to gloss over a problem to make the imagery coherent. For if Greeks believed that lionesses were particularly fierce in defence of their infant cubs, why is it that, at the end of the play, Jason seems to use the lioness only as an image of savagery and to pass up the chance to drive home the yawning gulf between Medea’s and the lioness’s maternal instincts. Why does he not say something like: ‘not even a lioness behaves like this’?

Hunting lionesses in Greek literature

So did a Greek audience find the image of the lioness as conventional as it seems to us? Was it just one part of the wider imagery of animals and monsters? Or does its prominence at the start and end of the play indicate a special significance? Did

the Greeks in fact believe that the lioness was particularly protective of her cubs? Or are we projecting onto the Greeks our own assumptions about the content and significance of the image?

The only way to begin to answer these questions is to explore where and how lionesses feature in other contexts. Lionesses elsewhere in tragedy will offer the most directly comparable evidence, but we will also have to think about the lioness in epic poetry, and what other authors of the Classical period said about the lioness’s behaviour ‘in nature’.

Homer, it turns out, never once uses the word ‘lioness’ (*leaina*), and even tragedies famous for their powerful women are surprisingly short on lionesses. Indeed, in all the rest of Greek tragedy there are only eight references to lionesses to set beside the four in the *Medea*, and only four of these certainly refer to mortal women. Lions, by comparison, are far commoner: twenty-five in Euripides alone. So, already, the image of the lioness starts to look rather unconventional; and with a third of all extant tragic references to the lioness in the *Medea* alone, the case for a special significance starts to build.

Maternal lions

Things take another unexpected twist when we discover that elsewhere in tragedy it is possible to compare a mother who does everything to protect her child with a lion, rather than a lioness. When Peleus, in Euripides’ *Andromache*, rebukes Menelaus for tying up the heroine from whom the play takes its name, he asks him whether he imagined he was dealing with ‘a bull or a lion’? He does so as he rescues Andromache from being put to death after she has handed herself over to Menelaus in order to save her son’s life. A more appropriate context for the fiercely

maternal lioness is hard to imagine, but she somehow fails to put in an appearance.

Still, even if one protective mother is described as a lion, might not the four other cases in which tragic women are imagined as lionesses prove that she is merely an exception to the rule? Not at all! Two of the four lionesses are linked with Clytemnestra (who has a poor record as a mother – according to Electra, at least) and the third with Agave (the mother who, in a Bacchic frenzy, helps tear her son Pentheus to pieces). Only the fourth lioness, which might, or might not, allude to Ajax’s concubine Tecmessa as she protects her son, might prove the single passage in tragedy which assumes the lioness to be particularly maternal.

But if the lioness was not known for a powerful maternal instinct, was the lioness reckoned ferociously protective exclusively at the moment of giving birth? This smacks slightly of desperation. If we are bolder we will entertain the possibility that Greeks made exactly the opposite assumption – that lionesses were particularly non-maternal – and consider how well this fits with other evidence for lionesses outside tragedy.

The painful birth of the lioness

Herodotus, who is contemporary with the tragedians, makes the surprising claim that the lioness has only one cub in her life because, before birth, it so lacerates its mother’s uterus with its claws that her entire womb is expelled with the cub in labour. And similar accounts in other authors claim that the lioness has only two cubs because she has only two teats with which to suckle them – teats which are then destroyed by her twin offspring’s claws. It wouldn’t be surprising if Greeks thought that the lioness was especially ferocious at the moment of birth because of the pain inflicted on her, and perhaps even that this ferocity was directed at her cubs.

The non-maternal lioness may even be inherited by tragedy from Homer. Even though Homer can refer to a mother of lions (without using the word lioness), we find that he attributes exactly the protective instincts we previously assumed for the lioness to certain of his lions. Most Homeric lions, of course, feature in similes as images of the male heroes’ courage,

destructiveness, or noble isolation, but there are two prominent and famous lions whose special efforts to protect or to avenge the loss of their cubs stand for Ajax as he defends the body of the dead Patroclus, and for Achilles as he mourns his companion's death. Since antiquity these protective males have often been interpreted as females on the assumption that Homer writes 'lion' for both 'lion' and 'lioness'. But already by the end of the fifth century B.C., one poet and scholar called Antimachus of Colophon believed (because of the way he understood Homer) that it was the lion, and not the lioness, who cared for any cubs.

Of course, to emphasize the male's protectiveness is not necessarily to deny a strong maternal instinct. Nor can we be certain of how common Antimachus' view may have been. But the possibility that Greek assumptions about the lioness as a mother were diametrically opposed to our own certainly does not conflict with what we find in Homer.

Tearing assumptions apart

What have we learned? When Euripides employs the image of Medea 'with the look of a lioness that has just given birth' he is doing something more than being retrospectively ironic. He hints at what her children may have cost her; that they will be her only 'cubs'; and that her attitude to them may not be straightforwardly maternal. This is a far more particular and arresting image than we supposed. By rediscovering its strangeness we recover more of the complexity of Euripides' poetry. But we also discover how dangerous is our tendency to suppose that our own assumptions are universally valid.

Matthew Hiscock recently completed a doctoral thesis on the motif of suicide in Greek literary texts. He is currently a Mellon Fellow at the University of Cambridge.